

Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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Editorial

NEWSLETTER FOR BIRDWATCHERS – INDEX for VOL. 20 (1980) – 31 (1991).

To many of our readers it will be gratifying. I hope that an entire issue (Vol. 34 No. 3) of the Newsletter for Birdwatchers is devoted to the Index for Vol. 20–31. The theme of having such an index compiled and published has been an ever-recurring one. Now that it has been made available readers will consider it to be of great advantage to have a key which enables them to locate articles from past issues in which they are interested. Needless to say it is virtually impossible to lay hands on them, without an index.

In our early years, commencing December 1959, J.S. Serrao did produce a few indices, but unfortunately we were unable to have any more, and there is excellent material in the issues from 1960 to 1980. In these two decades there was a noticeable increase in public interest in birdwatching and conservation in general, and this was reflected in the articles published in the Newsletter. The early writers Salim Ali, Peter Jackson, Loke Wan Tho, Lavkumar Khacher, Stairmand, Stewart Melluish and a dozen others set a high standard of writing which created an invaluable momentum for later years. A glance at the ten year index from 1960-90 shows the wealth of material now available.

It is now our great good fortune that Aasheesh Pittie has taken the trouble to produce this Index for ten years, and in his introduction he has explained the method he has followed. It was a wise decision to produce an index of species on the basis of their scientific names, and simultaneously one relating to geographical locations. Some of our readers may wish for an index of common names as well, and we can think of this later. But an index of scientific names does induce the amateur to brush up his scientific terminology which is a great step forward in becoming a respectable ornithologist. It is only on the basis of scientific names that a bird can be placed in its General, Family and Order.

One of the joys of birdwatching is to sit back after an outing and recall the sights one has seen. The pleasure is multiplied if one can turn to the descriptions of one's colleagues and see what they have written on the same subject. There is a freshness in the reports of the Newsletter fraternity which is not present in the said accounts of reference books. And without transgressing modesty, one can be proud of the many "new" sightings of birds from localities about which there are no records in the Handbook.

S. Sridhar, our publisher, always willing to support the cause of birds, may consider publishing all articles in

combined volumes (one volume for each decade). The cost will be around Rs. 750/- for the three volumes, and if these can be supplied with an index, they would constitute valuable reference material. Alternatively, of course, people who have the Newsletters, could have them bound themselves, and purchase the index. It would be useful to get a response from our readers about these suggestions.

Meanwhile, please make use of the index – look back on previous writings critically, and enjoy the experience.

Newsletter for Birdwatchers, I N D E X FOR VOLUMES 20 (1980) TO 31 (1991).

Compiled By
AASHEESH PITTIE, 14-7-370 BEGUM BAZAAR,
HYDERABAD - 500 012.

Introduction

This index grew out of a personal need. I used to write popular pieces for the local newspapers and needed more up-to-date information about the bird world than was present in available books. I realised that the journals, newsletters, etc., were not being indexed at all, or were indexed irregularly. The crux of the matter was that these very media were the repositories of up-to-date information!

So I began indexing every article I read on 5" x 3" indexing cards. Later I transferred all these entries onto a database on the computer, where the indexing operations have become a breeze. When I started this little exercise, I was in search of information either on a species or on aspects of avian biology or the science of ornithology. Another topic was the areas where birds were reported from. This has remained the pattern since then.

From an article, paper, etc., I choose the most important 'keyword/s' under which to index the entire article. Thus the birds in checklists from places have been ignored and the article indexed under the place-name, the idea being that a birdwatcher would either be interested in a bird (species) or in an area, for his requirement. The system does have its own limitations. As everyone knows, a detailed index of every bird-name and every place-name that has appeared in print, would be an ultimate ideal. But that requires a great deal of time which I cannot spare. Another difficulty is in indexing abstract articles, letters, etc.

Geographically, the index restricts itself to the sub-continent i.e., India and her neighboring countries. Where a place is not prominent or clear, I try to index it under a district, working upwards towards state and then country. Similarly, where a species is not explicitly mentioned, I index the article under the common family name of the bird, eg., 'Woodpecker' and/or under its genus, where that is mentioned. Though care has been taken to include every paper pertinent to the sub-continent and its birdlife, there is a possibility that something has been missed. If these discrepancies are pointed out, I can make the corrections for future use.

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—(1981): SOME NEW RECORDS FROM MADRAS CITY. 21:3-4:4-8.

—(1981): ADYAR ESTUARY IN DANGER. 21:5:14.

—(1981): MADRAS - COMMENTS. 21:6:8-9.

—(1981): EARLY ARRIVAL OF COMMON SWALLOWS *HIRUNDO RUSTICA* FOR 3 CONSECUTIVE YEARS IN MADRAS. 21:7:13-14.

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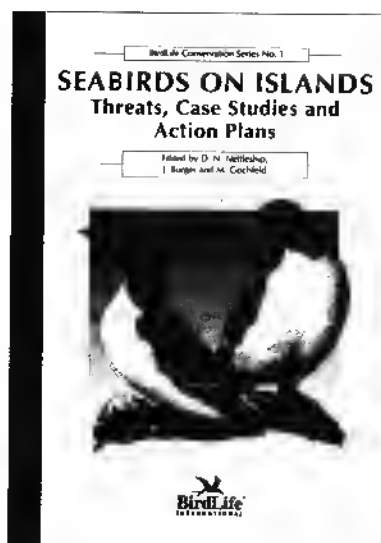
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The BirdLife Conservation Series

In July 1994, BirdLife International will be launching the first books in its new BirdLife Conservation Series, successor to the ICBP Technical Publications. With a larger format and a new and more flexible design, the primary content of the series will be outputs from BirdLife research programmes. The target readership of political decision-makers, conservation NGOs and the scientific community – as well as the interested general reader – will find in the new series up-to-date information on the status of birds and their habitats throughout the world and the problems that affect them, incorporating the latest developments in conservation research and management.

To ensure a continuing outlet for the important material generated by BirdLife symposia and workshops, much of those data will in future be accommodated within Bird Conservation International (BCI), either as part of the normal journal or as special symposia volumes. With this arrangement, BCI, published by Cambridge University Press but under full editorial control of BirdLife, will become more closely integrated within the BirdLife publications strategy; the journal and the new BirdLife Conservation Series will be complementary publications.

The first publications in the new series will be :

Seabirds on Islands ; threats, case studies and action plans. D.N. Nettleship, J. Burger and M. Gochfeld (eds). 350 pp approx. The proceedings of the Seabird Specialist Group Workshop held in New Zealand during the BirdLife / ICBP 1990 World Conference. Contains summaries and analysis by leading workers of problems facing seabirds around the world.

Editor : ZAFAR FUTEHALLY, No. 2205, Oakwood Apartments, Jakkasandra Layout, Koramangala 3rd Block, 8th Main, Bangalore 560 034.

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Cover Photo : Female Purplerumped Sunbird (*Nectarinia zeylonica*) taking off from nest. This tiny delicate bird has a marked preference for flower-nectar; siphoned off with its long tubular tongue. Sunbirds inhabit a variety of tracks, that include scrub jungle, woodlands, cultivated fields and gardens.

Photo : S. Sridhar, ARPS

Putting up with mother

Moorhens make the best of it

Incest is one of the great taboos for both humans and other animals. In the natural world, there are many ways of avoiding inbreeding with close relatives, from enforced migration of one sex to an inbuilt attraction towards strangers. But some moorhens, in Cambridgeshire at least, are breaking all the rules and apparently deciding that in certain circumstances, incest is best.

Peakirk Waterfowl Gardens attracts an unusually high density of moorhens to breed in safety. These birds were thought to be strictly monogamous, but when Dr Susan McRae started studying them, she found that about 10 per cent of breeding males had two female partners who laid their eggs and incubated them in the same nest. It is easy to see why the male would be happy with this arrangement, but why should the older female tolerate the situation?

Normally both male and female moorhens are very aggressive in defence of their territories.

Laying in the nest is synchronised in these trios to avoid rejection by either female, each of which lays four to eight eggs. Perhaps the senior female can recognise her own eggs and brood them preferentially by altering their position in the nest? By marking the eggs, Dr McRae found that they were all randomly positioned in the nest. Despite this, the junior female did have a smaller clutch size and lower hatching success.

Because the population at Peakirk is ringed and has been studied for several years, Dr McRae could tell that most of the junior females were daughters from the senior female's previous brood. Therefore the senior female was increasing her own genetic contribution to the next generation by tolerating her daughter's presence, which did not seem to affect her own breeding success. The daughter, though, did rear fewer chicks than she would have done in a monogamous pair.

DNA fingerprinting showed that all the chicks were indeed the resident male's offspring. So why does the subordinate female risk the hazards of inbreeding and tolerate a lower reproductive success by breeding communally? Dr McRae believes the answer lies in the crowded conditions at Peakirk, where territories are at a premium. Moorhens often produce two broods a year, and the young from the second brood may overwinter on their parents' territory. As pairing takes place in the winter, Dr McRae believes that these late-hatched females will lose out when competing for partners and territories. So the best option is to stay at home with mum and produce few chicks rather than go off on your own and fail to breed entirely.

MILES BARTON

Get the most into your garden

To attract a bird, just put mealworms in its special place

If you want to be successful at attracting wrens, wagtails and even woodpeckers to your garden, the answer is at hand - mealworms. Mealworms are available from pet-food and fishing tackle shops.

These are a robin's favourite food but, as bird-food specialist Chris Whittles has discovered many other species will also become regular visitors to a mealworm feeding site given the right presentation. Whittles first tried the experiment on blue tits and great tits. Picking a few mealworms out of the bran in which they are sold, he placed them on the bird table in a margarine tub. "In no time," he told BBC WILDLIFE, "five species of tit came roaring in for a feed". As supplies were topped up, a few of the meal worms fell on the ground, and soon a congregation of blackbirds, thrushes and starlings were mopping them up.

The next stage was to find a way of attracting more strictly insectivorous birds which seldom visit birdtables. Wrens, Whittles found, would readily take mealworms scattered under the bushes where they were foraging - a location where more extrovert species wouldn't be likely to take over. Wagtails, both pied and grey, also revealed themselves as fanatics if mealworms were placed on large stones near the edge of a pond.

But it is woodpeckers that most people really aspire to have as garden visitors. This requires a bit more ingenuity. For great and lesser spotted, the answer is to provide a half-rotten tree trunk with mealworms packed into cracks and holes. Green woodpeckers, which feed predominantly on ants, need a custom-built anthill. A pile of earth covered by a dustbin lid will soon be colonised by ants. Then fill them with mealworms. By topping up supplies at the same time every day you can soon rely on regular visits. At one site, the feeders just had to whistle, and in they'd come. The 'best sighting, at any of the 'mealworm birdtables', was of 18 woodpeckers (a mixture of greens and great spotted), all feeding together.

These new techniques will undoubtedly provide hours of innocent entertainment for the birdwatcher, but what's in it for the birds? Quite a lot, it seems, particularly in a cold, wet spring like the one many of us have just experienced. While caterpillars are in short supply, mealworms provide a nourishing supplement for hungry nestlings. And, says Chris Whittles, the mealworm experiment points us towards a new and exciting way of feeding birds. Whereas in the past we hung up a bag of nuts and reckoned we had a feeding site, in future each garden will have several different sites, each customised to the tastes of different types of bird.

DILYS BREESE